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Human Rights Council

Social Forum

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**Panel: How education today can strengthen opportunities for the future**

When we think about the future, and what lies ahead for secondary education, it’s worth flagging that the international community is already in arrears. Nearly 200 million youth of secondary school age were out of school in 2017.

According to the Global Education Monitoring Report, to achieve universal secondary school completion by 2030, all children needed to enrol in primary school by last year, yet the intake rate in low income countries was 73 percent in 2016.

Most states now provide secondary education to high numbers of children, and greater national and international emphasis has been placed on formal secondary education, particularly through the lens of the SDGs.

But, in most countries where Human Rights Watch has conducted research, technical and vocational education – which is part of the right to secondary education—is still perceived as the end of the pipeline for many who dropped out early; a landing place for those who were pushed out because they did not achieve a grade to pursue formal higher secondary education; and part of an economic strategy to ensure that high volumes of young people learn some skills so that they are employable, even if in precarious jobs.

Often, vocational schools are also the only option given to children with disabilities – many of whom are forced to study in special schools due to the lack of focus on inclusive primary and secondary education.

So, what needs to happen to promote and protect the right to secondary education, in its broadest terms, for all children?

I will focus on five pressing matters, all of which are based on hundreds of interviews of children and young adults conducted by Human Rights Watch researchers.

It’s nearly 40 years since the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights entered into force. Yet, many countries do not guarantee free secondary education in practice. Although most countries do guarantee free lower secondary education in law or policy, in too many, the costs of higher secondary education most often fall on families. We have also found that secondary vocational schools are often excluded from fee-free policies. Even when all forms of secondary education are free, children still supplement school budgets through informal fees, indirect costs, and even exam fees.

Who does this affect? Children from the poorest households, who are most affected by poverty and inequality.

Human Rights Watch believes all governments should be providing free secondary education for all children to ensure all can benefit from secondary education.

Some countries stop children from continuing secondary education, for example, through their use of filtering primary school leaving exams, or compulsory exams half-way through secondary education.

Who does this affect? Children who may be lagging behind, academically speaking, because of social and development reasons and who do not receive adequate teaching or support in overcrowded classrooms; as well as children with disabilities who may not even be guaranteed support or accommodations to take these exams.

Globally, little has been done to acknowledge the need for education systems to be fully inclusive and stamp-out discrimination in teaching, curricula and the school environment. This requires a greater focus led by states.

For example:

Some states hosting large numbers of refugee children have prevented humanitarian agencies and national NGOs from supporting access to formal, nationally accredited secondary education so that refugee children can continue their education, and in some contexts, have obstructed access to vocational and technical training.

Turning to groups that remain somewhat invisible in this forum’s discussions, in some countries, ironically those with very high levels of adolescent fertility rates, pregnant girls, adolescent mothers or girls forced to marry are stigmatised, discriminated against and intentionally banned from secondary schools a result of government policies. Yet, little is done to prevent and tackle teenage pregnancies, including through the adoption of comprehensive sexuality education.

LGBTI+ students also experience high levels of stigma and discrimination, and are most often bullied and targeted by teachers and students alike, and exposed to high levels of violence which significantly impact their experience in schools.

Who stands to lose when these groups of children experience exclusion, discrimination and violence? All of our societies.

In closing, children have rights to and through education. When done well, secondary education in all its forms is the gateway to many opportunities for young people. But when millions of children do not benefit from quality secondary education, in all its forms, all other aspects of their lives suffer.

Minding the gap is not enough right now –the gap is clear. Children and young adults globally need states to prove action, and to be accountable for not realizing the right to secondary education for all.